

German army takes command of strike force in northern Afghanistan

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On July 1 the German army took command of a NATO strike force in the north of Afghanistan, providing a combat force in the region for the first time.

The Quick Reaction Force (QRF), consisting of 200 well-armed German soldiers, is stationed in Mazar-e-Sharif and will be deployed mainly for combat missions in northern Afghanistan. Deployments in the war-torn south of the country are also possible, and there is no time limit for the QRF mission, although military planners estimate that troops will be needed in the country for between 10 and 15 years. Until now, the role of the QRF was filled by a Norwegian unit, which has been operating in the region under German responsibility since 2006.

Defence Secretary Franz Josef Jung, (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) stressed that the German population should be clear there was a high risk of casualties with the deployment of the new force.

The circumstances of the transfer of command make clear the extent to which the German army is already involved in an escalating war. Even as the new German forces were being dispatched in a military ceremony, German soldiers already posted in Afghanistan were victims of an attack 15 kilometres from Kunduz. Two German soldiers were injured in a bomb attack. According to an army report, their injuries are not life-threatening.

Last Wednesday Taliban units employed an antitank missile to shoot down a helicopter filled with coalition troops in the proximity of Kabul, and on the weekend a suicide bombing in the capital killed at least 40 near the Indian embassy.

Resistance to the occupation of the country by foreign troops is clearly growing. Attacks are increasing not only against troops involved in US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), which has repeatedly carried out massacres of the civilian population in the country's south and the east, but also against the international

protection force ISAF, which German propaganda likes to present as a force for civil assistance and peace. The number of the attacks involving deaths and injuries has escalated in recent months.

Last Wednesday, Europe's NATO military commander US Gen. John Craddock revealed facts about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. According to his tally, the number of clashes between IASF troops and the Taliban has increased by 41 percent since the spring. The web site *icasualties.org* reports that in the month of June more allied soldiers died in Afghanistan (45) than in Iraq (30). This is the highest number since the fall of the Taliban regime at the end of 2001. In both countries, most of the military casualties are American.

General Craddock, who formerly headed the Guantánamo prison, seized upon these figures to argue for more military engagement on the part of the Europeans. He explained that NATO troops needed better equipment in order to move faster to combat areas and to have less restrictions placed on their deployment by national governments.

A 72-page report released last week by the US Defence Department also highlights the extent of the resistance to the combined armies of the US, NATO, the UN and the European Union.

At one point, the report describes the Taliban resistance in Afghanistan as an “indestructible rebellion,” and predicts that the Taliban will either maintain, or even increase, the current rate of attacks for the rest of 2008. The report also states that Western troops confront a two-pronged opposition, consisting of the Taliban in the south of the country and a coalition of different rebel groups in the east of Afghanistan.

This May witnessed the second biggest ever combat operation with German participation in the north of Afghanistan. Around 60 German soldiers were involved in the so-called “Operation Karez”. The offensive was led

by the German Brigadier General Dieter Dammjacob, the head of the ISAF northern regional command.

According to the web site *German-Foreign.Policy.com*, the aim of the offensive was to regain control of territory lost by NATO to rebels last year. At that time, in its first combat mission under German command, the ISAF launched an assault on the rebellion in the region (“Operation Harekate Yolo”). Both missions were carried out by the Norwegian Quick Reaction Force (QRF), supported by the Afghan army.

According to media reports, this latest military offensive took place outside of German mandated territory and in all probability violated the parameters laid down by the German parliament for the deployment of the country’s troops in Afghanistan.

On the occasion of the transfer of command, Dammjacob thanked the Norwegian QRF and its commander, Kjell Inge Baekken. The QRF had supported the recent operation “Karez” against the Taliban “with decisive military strength”, he declared. Baekken responded by saying it was very difficult to forecast what the Germans could expect in the coming months: “However, there are dangers out there.”

There can be no doubt that this latest transfer of command will plunge German troops into bloody confrontations. It represents a new stage in the revival of German militarism, which was strictly limited by the German constitution for much of the post war period.

At the same time, the German army wants to supplement its troop strength in Afghanistan by an additional 1,000 soldiers. This was announced by the German defence secretary last week. In future, an extra 1,000 German soldiers will join the current force of 3,500, “in order to be able to react more flexibly to challenges”, according to Jung. The planned increase to 4,500 soldiers effectively quadruples the number of German troops in the country since the German army commenced its mission seven years ago.

The Bundestag will vote on whether to increase troops deployments this autumn, but it is already clear that there exists a broad majority, both in the ruling coalition (Social Democratic Party-CDU-Christian Social Union), and among the opposition Greens and pro-business Free Democratic Party. The only party to reject the deployment is the Left Party. There are already indications, however, that the Left Party is willing to use the issue of deployment in Afghanistan as a bargaining chip in order to secure its participation in the near future in a federal coalition government.

The current mandate for German operations in Afghanistan runs out on October 13, 2008, and Jung plans to push for its extension until December 2009. The two months extension to the yearly renewal is clearly intended to prevent the German deployment becoming a theme in the parliamentary elections due in autumn of next year.

The planned increase in troops has been greeted with virtually unanimous applause by the CDU-CSU and the SPD. For Niels Annen, the vice-chairman of the SPD “left”, the increase is “okay”, and involved no fundamental change to the character of the deployment. While some Greens have expressed concern, the party leadership basically accepts the increase as “comprehensible from a military standpoint”.

A number of commentators have sought to explain the intensification of German military activity as merely a response to pressure from both the US and NATO. This, however, is only part of the explanation. In reality, the current grand coalition is merely escalating the policy of German military intervention which was begun by its predecessor—the coalition government of the SPD and Greens.

It was the Green foreign minister Joschka Fischer who insisted on the dispatch of German troops to Yugoslavia in 1998, and who also played a leading role in sending German troops to Afghanistan. In 2001, he headed the Petersburg conference, which appointed a lackey of the US government, Hamid Karzai, to head the Afghan interim government.

In his current role as a political commentator, Fischer has been arguing for months that Germany should intensify its political and military role on the European and world stage in order to defend German business interests. In many respects, he embodies and articulates most clearly the interests of the German ruling elite.

Fischer has repeatedly called for closer co-operation between European great powers (above all Germany and France), including a more self-sufficient European military foreign intervention force — with Germany in the driver’s seat, of course.



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